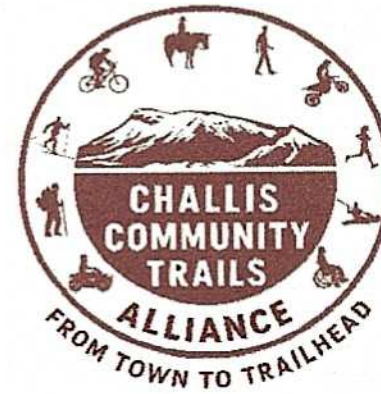




Challis Community Trails Alliance

To: U.S. Forest Service – Salmon Challis National Forest

Date: September 24, 2025

Subject: Comment Responses to the Challis Backyard Project

Attention Chris Waverek Deciding Official

The Challis Community Trails Alliance (CCTA) formerly the Challis Community Trails Collaborative, is a volunteer collaborative of interested local individuals that collaborates with local, state, and federal partners to develop a network of community trails for all users. This network of trails connects popular destinations in Challis with parks and trails on surrounding public lands. The alliance was formed in 2017 after a community focused steering committee met and applied for a National Park Grant to assist in developing a framework for a community trails program. The product of this effort was the publication of the Challis Community Trails Action Plan in 2019. Since that time, the Alliance has held monthly meetings to work towards implementing the goals and vision of that plan, except for a temporary hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Salmon-Challis National Forest, Challis-Yankee Ranger District, and the Middle Fork Ranger District have been federal partners of the alliance since its inception.

In the autumn of 2023, our group began discussing what future projects to bring to the community. During this time the Challis Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management issued the final decision on the Challis Foothills Trail Master Plan. This decision presented opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized single-track trails, conveniently located adjacent to the

community of Challis, to be built. We are now in the final construction of these trails and expect the new trails to be completed in 2026.

With success of the Challis Foothills Trail Master Plan, the CCTA discussed completing a similar project on the adjacent National Forest Service lands near Challis. Over multiple CCTA meetings along with local public input the project plan as submitted was developed. During our two preceding community trails summit events held in Challis, we solicited public input on potential next steps for this trails project on National Forest Service lands. The local Forest Service members who attended our CCTA meetings during this time supported this effort.

Our group's primary objectives for the National Forest plan were to ensure that such a project would provide diverse user options on single-track trails and be conveniently accessible by automobile. The only feasible location near the community of Challis was the Big Hill and Garden Creek areas. These locations are a short distance from Challis and can be easily accessed by automobile via the Custer Motorway.

In November 2023, during our monthly meeting, the CCTA unanimously agreed to proceed with the project.

Prior to our December 2023 monthly meeting, a few of our members prepared a draft (i.e. first pass) GIS trail layout of what the trail system might look like. Some of the routes were suggested by Heath Perrine, Challis-Yankee, and Middle Fork District Ranger as part of this collaborative exercise. In the December 2023 meeting, the CCTA group was shown this map. Comments as to trails to add, trails to remove, and trails where changes in designation are needed were provided. From those comments, the draft GIS map became the starting point for members to complete the necessary field work during the summer of 2024. This work included walking, flagging and modifying routes based on local field knowledge.

Throughout the initial ten months of 2024, our monthly meetings were characterized by regular discussions regarding our proposed project. Initially,

we focused on what makes a sustainable trail system that conforms to Forest Service standards. This objective was aimed at providing our members with a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of various trail options.

Additionally, during the same period, our group engaged in communication with the Salmon-Challis National Forest to ascertain their specific requirements for the project package. The Forest Service's response at that time indicated that they required a thoroughly vetted project, including GPS tracks of all trails and design features.

In July, our group conducted a field day version of the meeting atop Big Hill to facilitate further discussion on the project. The presence of Recreation staff and the District Ranger from the Challis-Yankee and Middle Fork Districts was instrumental in providing guidance on the necessary steps for field verification. Consequently, members completed the required field verification process.

That summer, members of our group visited the field with our GIS map and examined proposed trails to determine which terrains were suitable for trail construction and would be sustainable. Where it was determined that a trail was sustainable, a GPS track was gathered and marked for reference to the Forest Service. By the end of September, all this information was compiled, and a written proposal titled the Big Hill/Garden Creek Trail Construction Project was prepared. The proposal included both multi-use motorized and non-motorized trails, which are permitted activities on National Forest lands.

On October 30, 2024, this proposal was electronically transmitted to Chris Waverek, District Ranger. It was accompanied by a letter of support signed by several partners, including The City of Challis, The Challis Chamber of Commerce, Salmon Valley Stewardship, the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, the Custer Economic Development Association, and the Challis Community Trails Alliance.

On December 3, Chris Waverek received a follow-up email containing the proposal in Word document format. When he discovered that his computer could not read the original document. Our group also provided the Forest Service with KML files of all recorded GPS tracks, which were forwarded to Mike Pierson, who was at that time preparing a map of the proposal.

On September 5, 2025, our group received notification that the Salmon-Challis National Forest was taking scoping comments on a project called The Challis Backyard. The comments period was open until the end of the month. This proposal outlined single-track non-motorized use across all the trails we had submitted back in October 2024.

On September 12, 2025, the Challis Community Trails Alliance presented the proposed Challis Backyard project to our members at our regularly scheduled September monthly meeting. Members disagreed with the Forest Service decision to abandon 13 miles of multi-use single-track motorized trail that we had proposed with seasonal closure mirroring the surrounding area. Members also did not agree with the trailhead location being relocated to the 40070 road. Additionally, our proposal to change the classification of legacy trails from motorized to non-motorized in the Bayhorse and headwaters of Garden Creek was rejected. We had requested this change in designation to facilitate trail clearing maintenance of these trails.

Following a substantial amount of discussion during the September 2025 CCTA meeting, our group voted to not support the Challis Backyard project as proposed.

Consequently, this is our response to the proposed Challis Backyard Proposal.

Challis Community Trails Alliance Path Forward.

We request the Forest Service withdraw the Backyard Proposal as proposed and revisit the collaborative proposal submitted by the CCTA. Additionally, please refine the collaborative proposal without including e-bikes as part of the allowable users or any reference to the legacy trails. We are willing to

concede this item to expedite this proposal. If there are sections of the proposal that may trigger extraordinary circumstances, please inform us. We are willing to make concessions, but without a clear rationale from the Forest Service, we cannot offer reasonable alternatives that meet the goals of the community and the requirements of the Forest Service. With the Backyard Proposal from the Salmon-Challis National Forest it appears they do not value our collaborative efforts. This is contrary to the impression we had from the Salmon-Challis National Forest during the development of our proposal, which commenced in the fall of 2023. We look forward to working with you to remedy this situation.

Attached are the original proposal and the signed Letter of Support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ben Hulse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ben" and the last name "Hulse" clearly distinguishable.

President, Challis Community Trails Alliance